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ABSTRACT

Four principles of language arts teaching in the open school are, first, "school" becomes "workshop," where emphasis is on giving students opportunities for self-discovery, self-discipline, and self-control. Second, "teachers" become "learning facilitators," so that instead of thinking about what he wants to teach, the teacher focuses on the child's learning. Third, the child's approach is always the starting point. Every activity is planned to begin at the point where the child is when he is ready for it. Fourth, the educated life is for here and now; we can never be certain that tomorrow will come for any of our students. Therefore, we must be accountable to them each day of their lives in our schools and classrooms. The problem with implementing open education in American schools is that American educators try to do in three months what it took the British a twenty-five or thirty year period to do. Open education is a philosophy, not a facility. Attention should be turned away from the naive concept of open space buildings and toward how to implement the philosophy and principles of open education. (SW)

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LANGUAGE ARTS IN THE OPEN SCHOOL

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The "open school" for me means a style of education--a philosophy, not a facility. Modern open-space buildings are not necessary for the development of open education. For example, one of the best open schools I have observed is in a 70 years old building in England.

The basic philosophy of the kind of open school I am describing includes value judgments about "good" educational procedures and assumptions about the innate capacities of children. It assumes that children essentially do want to learn and that they will cooperate with others in the school enterprise. Above all, the advocate of open education believes that means do matter as well as ends. In respect of language arts, for example, Rousseau's (1762) comment on Emile's education in reading expresses with modern freshness the view of the open school education:

> "I would rather he would never know how to read than to buy his knowledge at the price of all that can make it useful. Of what use would reading be to him after he had been disgusted with it forever?"

From these general philosophical considerations four practical principles of language arts teaching in the open school emerge:

1. "School" becomes "workshop."
2. "Teachers" become "learning facilitators."

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3. The child's approach is always the starting point.

4. The educated life is for here and now.

These are not listed in order of importance. Indeed, number four is probably the most important of all. I would like to describe these principles one by one, and then finish up by discussing some of the problems of implementing them in North American schools.

"Schools" into "Workshops"

Webster's dictionary definition of the verb "to school" is "to train, to teach," and "to discipline, to control." These words no longer provide an accurate description of the aims or activities of the school if it is of the open type. Webster's definitions seem to place all the emphasis on adults doing something to children or imposing their will on students, whereas the open-school educator thinks much more in terms of what comes from within the child himself. Self-discovery, self-discipline, and self-control on the part of students are more highly valued by the open educator. This has very important implications for the curriculum in the open school. Again, means matter as much as, if not more than, ends. The child must be allowed choices. How else can he learn to exercise choice? This does not mean anarchy, nor does it mean laissez-faire. Rather, it implies limited and planned freedom within the open classroom.

A recent publication by the Department of Education and Science (1972) in England, Open-Plan Primary Schools, describes the results of an official survey of such schools made by visiting inspectors. They found: "No schools gave the children total freedom of choice, and there was always some expectations ab

the kind of things to be covered in one or two days, or in a week; and they always included reading, writing, mathematics and usually creative work."

How to do it

This planned freedom of choice requires a different organization of the school environment. A variety of learning centers needs to be established including some for the more obvious language arts activities such as creative writing. But there will be many others in which the language arts component is integrated naturally in the activity. Ways should be found to allow these learning centers to overflow into the outdoors. From the practical point of view this permits large messy projects which might be difficult to fit into the regular classroom.

Practical success in the move from "school" to "workshop" depends very much on the provision of suitable materials. A typical open classroom should contain, in addition to the traditional tools of written communication, a wide range of other means of expression and activity: paints and dyes, brushes of all sizes, paper of many sizes and qualities, fabrics, clay, wool scraps, constructional kits, cookers, scales, animals, plants, flowers, musical instruments, beautiful books, and so on. These should be openly displayed and easily accessible.

One other practical foundation for the open education workshop is the abolition of rigid externally imposed schedules and other sources of distraction such as bells, buzzers and public address systems. It is patently ridiculus to require, for instance, that at a particular hour of the clock or on the sound of a bell a child should "turn on" his

creative art abilities. Similarly, how can an appropriate work style in creative writing be developed in an atmosphere of rude interruptions by bells or irrelevant, impersonal comments from a loud-speaker.

"Teachers" become "Learning Facilitators"

If the "school" is tranformed into a "workshop" or "learning laboratory" what becomes of the teacher? Will he be just a "laboratory assistant"? Certainly not. His role becomes very much more important than ever before--but the role is of a different nature to the conventional one. The teacher becomes more important but less apparently so. He is less in the spotlight, less of a "ham," because instead of thinking about what he wants to teach he is focusing on the child's learning.

John Blackie (1967), Chief Inspector of Primary Schools in England and one of the Assessors of the Plowden Commission, wrote as follows about this new role of the teacher:

> "The old type of teacher was all the time rather like an electric current. When he was switched on something happened. When he was switched off it stopped. The children had little chance of showing initiative. The sums they worked, the compositions they wrote, the poems they learned, the books they read, the topics they studied were all chosen for them. They did what they were told, and when they had finished they waited for more or 'got out their readers.' Many of the teachers who used this method were extremely skilful and the cleverest children learned much from them, but it was nevertheless a bad method, because it was so inflexible and because the children seldom learned to work by themselves. It imposed a

pattern of learning on all the class and could make little allowance for individual differences.

The new type of teacher plays a much more variable role. If you go into his classroom you may find him standing before the class and teaching them, but you are just as likely to find the class busily occupied with a variety of different things--books, writing, painting, mathematics, science--inside the classroom and out, while the teacher moves about among them, answering questions and asking them, offering encouragement, making suggestions, correcting mistakes, helping with difficulties, solving problems. The children are supplying their own current. They are wasting far less time and doing much more work, than under the old system. So is the teacher! Do not be under any delusion about that. The new methods make very heavy demands on the patience, good humour, energy, knowledge and skill of the teacher, but it is also true to say that they are much more rewarding for him as well as for the children. They learn much from him but he learns from them too. Their inventiveness and creativeness are released and they will ask him questions to some of which he does not know the answer off-hand. He can never fall back on a dull routine. The children are always stimulating him to make new discoveries. He may be dog-tired at the end of the day but he will never be bored."

Note Blackie's insistence that the teacher still teaches. In fact, he teaches more than ever before. But he is not just performing the stereotyped act of "teacher." Instead he is working alongside the child in a shared learning activity.

This change of role brings with it a very important difference in the teacher's preparations for the content of instruction. The right moment for teaching in the open school is when the individual child searches for the specific information he needs. By "teaching" here we mean any facilitation which the teacher provides--not necessarily simply telling. Thus the teacher in the open school is above all an opportunist. Then the teacher's knowledge is no longer a curriculum but a bank to be drawn upon when the best opportunity for learning arises.

How this opportunism affects language arts instruction is described by Vera Southgate (1973):

> "Likewise teachers need to acquire an extensive knowledge of what requires to be learned if the skills of literacy are to be effectively mastered. Their expertise could then be considered as a store of background knowledge from which they could draw at appropriate moments, rather than as an elaborately detailed curriculum of which every item has to be earnestly taught. The teacher would thus be in a strong position when the moment for a small amount of direct teaching arrives to help the child to take the next minute step forward and so channel his learning towards the ultimate goal of efficient reading."

The opportunist teacher intervenes on the basis of what is happening now plus his knowledge of the individual child. This knowledge is especially valuable in the open school. Where multi-age or "family" grouping is employed this knowledge of the individual needs of children can be very detailed and sensitive. When a teacher stays with the same child for three or more years they really get to know each other well.

Once again, some teachers may fear that this type of school must mean chaos. But this is a superficial impression. If one studies a successful open school carefully it soon becomes clear that the open school is actually more structured than the traditional school. It has to be to keep track of the wide range of activities and the individualized progress of the students. But this structure is concealed. It is not crudely imposed on the students. It is carried in the teacher's head and it is far more flexible than the conventional structuring of classroom teaching.

How to do it

The golden rule for successful implementation of this principle is to supply a superabundance of activities and materials. Probably the most serious error that has been made in American schools attempting to implement the open education style of the British primary school has been a lack of preparation in this respect--inadequate preparation of worthwhile projects for the students to undertake.

Related to this is the need for proper teacher preparation. Many "open schools" have failed because the teachers have not been oriented toward their change of role and have not been given sufficient information on the practical needs for implementing open education. Pilcher (1972) has described a case study of this problem: "The open classroom almost collapsed because most of the faculty members were unwilling to devote their energies to creating materials for the environment."

Record keeping has proved to be very important in the open education primary schools in England. Clearly, with so much individualization with classes of 30 to 40 students, the teacher and his students need written

records of the development of reading and writing subskills. The Department of Education and Science (1972) pamphlet listed in the references at the end of this article includes on pages 10-11 some useful suggestions on record keeping by students as well as teachers. Another useful source of ideas is Joan Dean's (1972) recent book, Recording Children's Progress.

The child's approach is always the starting point

The open school is a child-centered school. Every activity is planned so that it can begin at the point where the child is when he comes to it.

Some educational writers are very misinformed on this principle. They think that the child-centered approach is derived from a weak attitude of sentimental permissiveness. In actual fact the child-centered principle derives from consideration of practical efficiency in classroom learning. Typical of such misconceptions about the child-centered aspect of open education are some statements contained in a recent article by Carl Bereiter (1972). For example, he has this to say about the child's place in society:

> "...in the modern world at large what children do is not important. They have no economic value except as modest consumers; they have no political force, are incapable of any impact on the course of events; with rare exceptions they do not say or do anything that is of interest to anyone except those who dote on them."

Note the propagandist's technique in Bereiter's words "those who dote on them." They insinuate that the child-centered educator is a soft

sententalist, whereas he, the writer, is a tough realist.

In the same article Bereiter makes an extraordinary comment on the work of Jean Piaget:

> "Piaget'stheory is abstract, complicated, and peculiarly difficult for the English-trained mind to get hold of. It is concerned primarily with the development of reasoning and has little or no concern with emotions, social behavior, individual differences, or creativity. Furthermore, it is devoid of practical guidance on any matter....What Piaget's theory does do, however, is provide a license for calling virtually anything a child does education."

Note again the insinuation that child-centered education is permissivism--giving the child license to do anything in the name of education. I cannot refrain from commenting on Bereiter's view of Piaget's work. While it is obvious from his own remarks that Bereiter does not understand Piaget's writings in contrast, my "English-trained mind" and the English-trained minds of numerous colleagues have not found Piaget's theory and research "peculiarly difficult...to get hold of."

Piaget's research has shown us time and time again the futility of imposing the adult conception of the world on young children. Their reasoning and thought processes are often very different to the adults', and it is wastefully inefficient to attempt to teach children in a conceptual framework they do not understand. Jerome Bruner (1960) has made this practical point very clear. He states:

> "It is only when such basic ideas are put in formalised terms as equations or elaborated verbal concepts that they are out of reach of the young child, if he has not first understood them

> intuitively and had a chance to try them out on his own. The early teaching of science, mathematics, social studies, and literature should be designed to teach these subjects with scrupulous intellectual honesty, but with an emphasis upon the intuitive grasp of ideas, and upon the use of these basic ideas

My co-author Derek Thackray and I have shown how in the interests of efficiency of learning, Bruner's principle must be applied to instruction in the language arts: "We believe that Bruner's words apply with the greatest possible force to the early stages of learning to read. The teacher who keeps in mind this quotation from Bruner will be constantly aware that reading readiness is a state of the teacher as well as the child. She will take care, not only to fit the child for reading, but also to fit the reading to the child." (Downing and Thackray, 1971).

Perhaps, the most outstanding demonstration of the reality of the principle of child-centered education is the two-volume report of the Plowden Commission in England. It is simply chock full of examples of the educational efficiency of starting every learning activity from the point of view of the child. The principle is enshrined in the title of the Plowden report, Children and Their Primary Schools.

How to do it

The practical implications of this third principle seem too obvious to spell out in detail. Perhaps, a few examples will point the general way.

The language-experience approach to learning to read and write is one essential component of instruction in language arts in the open school.

Centering on the child includes centering on the child's language. A substantial part of the child's first experiences of written language should be in his own language or dialect, and later experiences should never be disconnected from his personal linguistic life. Beginners need relevant experiences also which will develop their awareness of the structure of spoken and written language. Many young children come to school quite ignorant of the concepts and terminology which adults use in talking and thinking about language. Informal discussion of what is being written in the language-experience approach helps children to learn these concepts and the related technical terminology (see Downing, 1974).

A very wide range of books should be available to children in the open classroom. Just to take one example, there should not be one copy of one grade level school dictionary for each child. Instead, there should be a range of dictionaries varying in difficulty level and type of content. Included should be dictionaries which are designed to be child-centered, i.e., which provide the kind of information they want and in a form which they can comprehend (see Downing, 1972).

In such ways and many others learning efficiency is promoted in the open classroom by fitting activities and tasks to the child's natural way of thinking.

The educated life is for here and now

The most vital principle of language arts instruction in the open school is that education is not for some dim and distant future but

something to be enjoyed right now. I would like to propose two reasons why this principle is the most important of all in open education, one reason is philosophical, the other is, once again, a simple, straightforward matter of learning efficiency.

On philosophical grounds I believe that every minute of our working life as teachers must be dedicated to the principle that the educated life is for here and now. The child has the right to enjoy the fruits of his educational labours. That right may be effectively denied if we say to him, "this is hard work and very dull and boring, but when you get through college in fifteen years time you will get your reward." Life today is still full of hazards and dangers, and a substantial proportion of children die or develop disabling handicaps. We can never be certain that tomorrow will come for any of our students. Therefore, we must be accountable to them for every day of their lives in our schools and classrooms.

This philosophical consideration is very strongly supported by our practical concern for educational efficiency. With our students deeds speak louder than words. Therefore, if we believe in the value of education we should demonstrate it by our actions rather than make verbal propaganda for it. Piaget's (1932) research on childen's moral judgment brought out this point very clearly. Young children tend to ignore intentions and to focus instead on the amount of damage done in judging the naughtiness of an action. Why? Because, although most parents talk about intentions, they act with more severe punishments and anger when, for example, ten cups get broken than when only one is smashed and ignore the intentions of the cup breaker. Similarly, the

value of reading and writing will be judged by what the teacher does rather than by what he says about them.

How to do it

Vera Southgate (1973) has stated the practical implication of this principle most clearly:

> "In all reading tuition the first aim should be to produce children and adults who want to read and who do read; the second aim should be to help them to read effectively. If the second aim is given priority it is probable that the first aim will never be achieved. In other words, neither recreational nor functional reading can be expected to be the end product of extended intensive instruction in reading skills. Reading must consist of recreational and functional activities from the very beginning."

The key word here, despite its perhaps overpopularity in recent years, must be relevance. Every reading and writing activity should be relevant--that is, functional for the child. Anything which is mere ritual is bad teaching because it tells the child lies about the purposes of literacy. The sheer evil of school rituals is vividly documented in the book Letter to a Teacher (1970) written by the children who "failed" to learn to "to write":

> "That is the most upsetting aspect of your school: it lives as an end in itself."
>
> "...a boy who had just failed in one of your intermediate schools. He did not know a thing, but Gibraltar he called the 'Pillar of Hercules.' Can you imagine him in Spain asking for a ticket at the station window?"

> "Little Pierno, the doctor's son, has plenty of time to read fables. Not Gianni. He dropped out of your hands at fifteen. He is in a factory. He does not need to know whether it was Jupiter who gave birth to Minerva or vice versa. His Italian literature course would have done better to include the contract of the metalworkers' union. Did you ever read it, Miss? Aren't you ashamed? It means the life of half a million families."

In contrast, these "failures" wrote a critical book on Italian education which included research into national statistics on schooling, and which brought them a prize from the Italian Physical Society normally given to promising physicists. This must be a supreme example of the success of making literacy relevant for the student.

We are focussing on language arts in this article, and it is important to state that undue emphasis is not placed on reading and writing in the open school. Science, music, art, literature, and all knowledge are all to be enjoyed here and now. Much of the time in the open school is spent in initiating the novice to the joys of these activities through shared experiences with the teacher or other child who already knows their value.

Current problems in the open school in North America

In recent years there has been great interest in the open education concept developed in the primary schools of England. But a number of difficulties have arisen in the attempt to introduce this concept into elementary schools in Canada and the United States. Three outstanding

errors have been and still are being made.

(1) Evolution versus revolution. North American educators have written about the changes in British primary schools as a "revolution" whereas in fact it has been an evolution. For one thing it has taken about 25 to 30 years of slow change in England to arrive at the kind of open school discussed in this article. Secondly, it is not a question of overthrowing the old regime. As the Department of Education and Science (1972) pamphlet on Open Plan Primary Schools puts it, "The newer techniques of class arrangement do not replace the old, they add to them." In England, nearly three decades have been allowed for the concept of open education to grow. In America it is often thrown out after three months because "it doesn't work." Pilcher (1972) states: "A key question with this experiment, as with many other innovative programs, seems to be whether the school will allow the idea to reach a successful fruition." Failure also results from hasty adoption with consequent inadequate planning and preparation. As Nault (1972) notes: "This failure often seems traceable to the fact that children were thrust too quickly into situations where they needed to make complex decisions without being equipped with adequate choice-making skills."

(2) Fadism

Open education is not a fad as it has been carefully worked out in good infants and junior schools in England, but in the United States there are strong indications that it has been made into one of the latest school fads. As is usual in such American fads, the outward trappings are brought in without any necessary guarantee that the genuine educational concept has been understood. All over America and in many parts of Canada

open space buildings are going up, but all too frequently we find the same conventional closed education going on in the new buildings. For example, I have quite often seen large open spaces divided by invisible walls into Grade I, Grade II, and so on, the children sitting in neat rows being taught by traditional mass teaching techniques. All that you have then is inefficient class instruction, and I know of several cases where this has been recognized sufficiently to have real walls constructed between the classes. Carol Seefeldt (1973) writes:

> "Open spaces, it has become apparent, do not necessarily guarantee freedom in the classroom. Freedom to learn to grow, and to select your own learning activity does not seem to be a function of walls or lack of walls." And, "it is clear that it is just as easy to restrict learning to rigid segments in open spaces as in closed classrooms."

As I said at the beginning of this article, open education is a philosophy, not a facility.

Little research evidence is, as yet,available on the effectiveness of open schools. One interesting study, however, has been conducted by Judith Evans (1972) who compared British and American open schools. She noted several important differences which support our view that too much attention is being paid to the facility and not enough to the philosophy of open education in American schools. There was more language-experience activity in the British schools and less reliance on commercial materials, especially stereotyped workbooks, than in the American schools Evans studied.

(3) The fallacy of open spaces

Not only is the open education philosophy much more important than the open school facility, but it is doubtful whether these agoraphobic open spaces are even the best plan for implementing the philosophy. Architects of better "open plan" schools have recognized this and provided all kinds of ways of breaking up the space into a variety of sizes and shapes suited to the kinds of activities required in open education. There is still a place for walls and even rooms in the open philosophy school.

Attention needs to be turned away from the naive concept of open space buildings and on to how to implement the philosophy and principles of open education. Buildings should be designed or adapted to suit the needs of teachers and children as they work out this style of education.

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